

## Award for Service to the Community Judge Wadie Thomas

What do balloons, clowns and ice cream sandwiches have to do with being a judge?

Plenty if you're trying to gain media and public attention to the need for more adoptions of children from the foster care system.

A festive National Adoption Day ceremony that he orchestrates each November for the past four years is just one of the reasons Separate Juvenile Court Judge Wadie Thomas of Omaha is this year's honoree as the Distinguished Judge for Service to the Community.

Judge Thomas, 50, who was named to the Douglas County juvenile court bench in 1995, said he culled a few tips from Los Angeles Judge Mike Nash, who is involved in Adoption Day activities there.

On Adoption Day, kids who have been in the foster care system get their adoptions finalized. By finalizing them on a Saturday, with a celebratory atmosphere involving balloons, treats and a teddy bear for each child, much more attention can be brought to the event, the judge said.

It's attention – from the public and media – that's needed if more children are going to find permanent placement in new families.

"We need more adoptive homes," said Thomas. "We need more families to step up and adopt kids. The Adoption Day gets media attention for the issue."

Besides his work on adoptions, the judge has been keenly involved in

speaking out and seeking solutions to problems like disproportionate sentences for minorities, domestic violence and alternatives to incarceration for juveniles.

Thomas currently is the chairman of the Committee on Diversity for the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. He has been on the committee for five years, traveling across the country giving presentations on the issue of disproportionate incarceration.

"People need to be educated about disproportionate incarceration because it is a problem across the country, including our state," Thomas said. "People need to recognize that, and address the issues that lead to it."

For the past three or four years, the judge has been involved in domestic violence presentations as part of a project through the federal Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). In that role, he teaches judges about the dynamics and workings of domestic violence and how it impacts adult and child victims. He is part of a faculty team that hosts the traveling institute.

Thomas also serves as "lead judge" or team leader for the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges demonstration site in Omaha aimed at finding community detention alternatives for juveniles.

The Graduated Sanctions Collaborative Team that Thomas leads is seeking to develop alternatives to detention. The team was one of 10 chosen out of 64 applications made to the national council.

The goal of the group is to establish a juvenile assessment center, identifying the risks and needs of those who go through the system and to try to divert as many



*Mary Ann and Wadie Thomas at the Judicial Dinner*

juveniles as possible to reduce detention center populations. Other goals are to enhance parental involvement, general education of the public, and improve training for workers.

"We find a lot of kids whose needs can be met without actually being charged in court," Thomas said. "If we can identify their needs and they're willing to participate, we can reduce number of kids in the juvenile justice system."

Also this year, Judge Thomas is serving as regional coordinator for the high school mock trial competition. "It's worthwhile," he said, "because it gives kids an opportunity to compete, see what it's like to be involved in a lawsuit."

Thomas is an Army veteran and criminal justice graduate of Alabama State University who worked as a prison guard for one year before entering law school at Creighton University.

After graduation in 1980, he was in private practice for 15 years, and worked as a state employee appeals arbitrator and hearing officer for discrimination cases before being named to the juvenile court bench by then Gov. Ben Nelson.

The judge and his wife, Mary Ann, have been married six years. ♦

# Improvement of the Judiciary

## Judge John Icenogle

The headline told a tragic tale – 10 children in Nebraska killed this year in escalation of abuse and neglect.

When Carol Stitt, the head of the state's Foster Care Review Board, decided she needed to visit the governor about the horrible problem, her first phone call was to a long-time ally in addressing and explaining the issues facing children in the state: District Judge John Icenogle of Kearney.

Stitt said she asked Icenogle to accompany her because of his excellent communication skills, an ability to set a "roadmap" for change while remaining respectful, and a clear vision in seeking the best outcome for children.

"Judge Icenogle has provided me with language to describe how the culture of non-intervention contributed to this problem," Stitt said.

The respect earned by state leaders like Stitt, and a long-term – and often behind-the-scenes – dedication to the education of judges and everyone involved in the judicial system, are two of the reasons Judge Icenogle is the 2003 honoree as the Distinguished Judge for Improvement of the Judicial System.

Joe Steele, who will retire at the end of the year as State Court Administrator, said he felt so strongly that Icenogle deserved the recognition that Steele did something he'd never done – nominated a judge for a service award.



*Barb and John Icenogle at the Judicial Dinner*

"In some ways, the things this judge does go unnoticed," Steele wrote. "He is usually not out in front ... although he can be and has done that. The thing he is always doing is working behind the scenes, planning, organizing, and keeping people on track ...."

Icenogle, 54, has served as a judge for 27 years, after working two years as a private attorney.

He was appointed in 1976 by then Gov. James Exon to the county court bench; in 1990, then Gov. Kay Orr appointed him to the District Court.

Those who know him say the judge takes his job seriously and has long been a leader in improving the image of the judiciary and the education of those within the system.

"Our reputation can never be good enough," Icenogle said. "We should always strive to make it even better."

In that effort, Icenogle has served as president of the County Judges Association and will serve in that role for the District Judges Association this upcoming year. He has served as president

of the Juvenile Justice Association. And, since 1995, he has headed the District Judges' Education Committee.

The committee, he said, has restructured the educational system to make it "all inclusive" to all who work in the judicial system.

"It's important because so many people come into the system to work who don't understand that what they do in their job impacts the perception of the judicial system," he said.

The education effort received a boost when the Supreme Court and State Legislature directed funds to hire a full-time coordinator for judicial education. Icenogle said changes should be noticeable within the next few months.

One of the judge's most visible contributions was in leading the effort, in 1988, to design the "How to Recognize and Treat Sexual Abuse" training for the judiciary.

That training program is recognized as a national model, providing two full days of education in child sexual abuse, working with child victims and taking appropriate action for the child.

The judge said he has had a long-term interest in children's issues, which started when, as a county judge, he inherited a position on the board of directors of a girls' group home in Kearney. His interest grew as he became involved in the issues of children's rights and juvenile jurisdiction.

His interest in children recently prompted Gov. Johanns to name him (along with Judge Vernon Daniels, Omaha and Judge Robert Ide, Holdrege) to his Children's Task Force, which is charged with addressing the issues that led to the 10 violent deaths of children so far this year.

## Chief Justice Presents Distinguished Service Awards During October Judicial Dinner

---

“It’s going to be a real challenge to produce results in four months,” said Icenogle, after that group’s first meeting recently.

The judge also was recently appointed by the Governor to serve on the Community Corrections Council, which will oversee new programs designed to alleviate prison overcrowding. The council will help set criteria for determining an offender’s eligibility to be diverted from prison into programs offering community supervision and treatment.

Icenogle said he’s been involved in prison issues for the past 15 years. Community corrections, he said, has the same concept as drug courts – extensive, out-of-jail supervision that leads to rehabilitation – but, until now, has not gotten the financial support.

“If we can improve any aspect of what we do and achieve a better result, we need to do it,” Icenogle said. “We need to be actively concerned that when we have to impose a sentence that the person who receives it benefits from it – if rehabilitation

is appropriate. It’s the last step in our obligation to fulfill our jobs.”

Judge Icenogle received an undergraduate degree from Columbia University in 1971, and then earned his law degree from Tulane University in 1974.

He and his wife, Barbara, have three children: a married daughter, Margot Burns, whose husband, Richard, is a Kearney police officer; and two sons, Samuel, 15, and John, 12. ❖



# TRIAL COURT JUDGE HIGHLIGHTS

## Separate Juvenile Judges Association

*Hon. Chris Kelly, Association President*  
<http://court.nol.org/comm/nsjja.htm>

## Record Number in Adoption Saturday

According to the Chief Justice, the number of children was 'remarkable'-- a record for Adoption Saturday at the Douglas County courthouse.

"We have two sets of twins, five groups of brothers and sisters, and many individual children. All together, we have 44 children making 30 permanent families today," said Chief Justice John V. Hendry during the press conference.

On Saturday, November 22, beginning at 8:30 a.m., Juvenile Court Judges Wadie Thomas, Vernon Daniels, Chris Kelly, Liz Crnkovich, and Doug Johnson; along with County Court Judge Steve Swartz and staff of the Douglas County and Juvenile Courts opened the courthouse to celebrate National Adoption Day -- Omaha 2003. That morning, a record number (over 40) of Nebraska's foster children were placed with adoptive families.



*Judge Wadie Thomas (center) reviews paperwork for upcoming hearings with his wife, Mary Ann Thomas (left), and juvenile court Administrative Assistant, Debbie Peck (right).*

In addition to his customary introductions and thank yous, Judge Thomas used this year's press conference to announce a new endeavor at the Douglas County Separate Juvenile Court: Monthly adoption reviews.

"For those children who are available for adoption, meaning those where the parental rights are no longer intact, the court will be bringing the cases back for adoption checks or reviews every 30 days. We've found from our experience in talking to others across the country including Salt Lake City, UT and Tucson, AZ, that bringing those back with some frequency helps to move the case along faster," said Judge Thomas.

Omaha's court joined an unprecedented number of courts across the country in celebrating National Adoption Day this year -- it is

expected that over 2,000 foster children adoptions will be finalized in the year 2003 nationally as a result of this special day.

In Nebraska, there are more than 6,500 children who are current wards of the State. Approximately 3,000 of the State's children currently live in foster care with hundreds more entering the foster care system each year. One hundred forty of these children are available for adoption.

Nationwide, there are approximately 542,000 foster care children and 126,000 of them are available for adoption. A recent national survey showed that four in 10 Americans have considered adoption. (National Adoption Attitudes Survey, funded by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption.) That translates into more than 80 million Americans. If only one

# TRIAL COURT JUDGE HIGHLIGHTS

out of 500 Americans adopted out of the foster care system, these children would have homes.

Since 1987, the number of United States children in foster care has doubled, and the average time a child



*Judge Steve Swartz (left) grabs a cup of coffee at the reception with Judge Doug Johnson (right) following adoption hearings.*

remains in foster care has lengthened to nearly three years. Each year, approximately 20,000 children in foster care will age out of the system without ever being placed with a permanent family.

According to Adoption Day host, Judge Wadie Thomas, the purpose of Adoption Saturday is two-fold: to draw public attention to the need for adoptions from foster care and to provide extended family members an opportunity to be present for the adoption.

The popularity of the Saturday morning program was evident at the “First Family Photo” area arranged by

the Department of Health and Human Services. Photographer Greg Votava moved his camera away from the seating area several times to accommodate extended family members in photos. Family groups ranged from three to 28 (the family of 28 was a combination mother & father, daughter & son-in-law who adopted two additional children each on Adoption Saturday).

The celebration itself was coordinated by the State of Nebraska Health and Human Services



*Rick Ruggles of the Omaha World Herald interviews Talisha who, along with her big brothers Dareius and Jonathan, were adopted by their Grandmother.*

Omaha Adoption and Administrative staff. Thanks to the generosity of the



*Shrine clown makes the ever-popular balloon sword for children during the party.*



# TRIAL COURT JUDGE HIGHLIGHTS

... *Adoption Day from previous page*

“Nebraska Adoption Agencies Association” and the “Adoption Partnership” (Lutheran Family Service, Child Savings Institute and Adoption Link Worldwide), each adoptive child received a “goody bag” filled with small gifts and each adoptive mother received a corsage. Donations from the “National Adoption Coalition” included t-shirts and cameras for each child. “Comfort for Court Kids, Inc.” working with “Fiesta” donated teddy bears presented by each judge to adoptees during the ceremony. Each child also received a handmade stocking donated by the “Omaha Quilters Guild” along with beanie babies and pillow pals. Many of the children made new friends with the clowns from the Tangier Shrine Center and Peter the “Near” Great, a local Omaha magician. Wells Blue Bunny donated ice cream and refreshments to complete the celebration.

Adoption Day also provided the judges with a public opportunity to recognize the good works of social services caseworkers. “Of course, none of this would be possible without the cooperation of the Department of Health and Human Services and I thank them for their assistance and dedication,” said Chief Justice Hendry. During the press conference, the Chief Justice asked all HHS workers in the room to raise their hands saying, “Thank you very, very much for all that you have done to help us to bring this together.” ❖